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4 February 1980

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Sources of Opposition to South Yemeni
President Ismail

25X1 The Marxist government of South Yemen, while apparently unpopular at home, seems to be in firm control. It employs an efficient and ruthless internal security apparatus to maintain domestic order. Most prominent opposition elements have either fled the country or have been exiled--if not jailed and executed. There are, however, strains within the inner ruling circle, and exiled opponents, dating from the pre-independence period and after, exist throughout the Arab world--primarily in Egypt, North Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. ☐

Historical Overview to Opposition in South Yemen

The pre-independence struggle for control of South Yemen was fought between the Front for the Liberation of Occupied Southern Yemen (FLOSY), an Arab nationalist movement with backing from Egypt, and the more radical socialist National Liberation Front (NLF). The NLF won the contest in the waning months of British rule, partly because of its uninhibited use of terrorism. Most FLOSY leaders fled the country and some have remained active in oppositionist activities to the regime in Aden. ☐ 25X1

In June 1969, the radical wing of the NLF--now the National Front (NF)--staged a coup and ousted its more moderate leadership, causing those that could to flee. ☐ 25X1

Throughout much of the 1970s, the two preeminent leaders of South Yemen--President Salim Rubayya Ali and party leader Abd al-Fatah Ismail--vied with each other for dominance. In June 1978, Ismail took over in a coup that saw Ali killed.

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Many of Ali's followers--reportedly numbering in the thousands--quickly fled to North Yemen. ☐

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Since Ismail's coup, tensions within South Yemen's ruling circle have reportedly grown. The struggle, guised sometimes in ideological terms, appears geographically rooted. Ismail is originally from the Hujarriyah region of North Yemen, as are his closest associates. Native South Yemenis, including Prime Minister Ali Nasir Muhammad (al-Hasani) and Defense Minister Ali Antar (Al-Bishi), reportedly resent the power North Yemenis wield in South Yemen. Ismail has been a leading advocate of early unity with North Yemen. His southern opposition appears more hesitant, fearing that South Yemen--and they personally--could be swallowed up in the merger. Tensions between the two factions peaked over the summer, and Ismail seemed to be the loser in a cabinet shuffle last August. Ismail is a survivor, however, and the friendship treaty with the USSR signed in October pointed to his continued strength. Nevertheless the political infighting goes on unabated. ☐

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A primary objective of Aden's leadership has been to remold South Yemen into a revolutionary socialist state. Before independence, the country, outside the city of Aden, was a traditionally conservative Muslim society dominated by tribes. This structure was seen as an obstacle to all economic and social progress, and therefore had to be eradicated. In the new order, the tribe was to cease serving as an independent power broker, and a number of steps were taken to divert tribal loyalty to the central government.

--The country was reorganized into six administrative provinces abolishing borderlines based on tribal divisions. This split tribes that for centuries had belonged to a single tribal unit. Governors appointed to the provinces were made responsible for the security of the tribal areas, and the heads of the party cells in the provinces were frequently chosen from outside the local tribes.

--In November 1970 all organizations of tribal character were abolished and the inhabitants were forbidden to use the tribal names.

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--An agrarian reform law enacted in December 1970 redivided the lands of tribal rulers among poor villagers.

--The military also underwent an extensive purge and reconstruction. The ouster of tribal elements was intended to stop the practice in which local elements operated on the instructions of a local leader rather than on the orders of army headquarters. The purge included a "changeover" of tribes. Whole units consisting entirely of one tribe were replaced by members of another tribe. Thus the link with the traditional tribal area was destroyed. Men were posted to units who did not belong to the tribe that generally manned these units. From about mid-1970, Revolutionary Military HQS were set up with political officers who gave political instruction, and a Popular Militia controlled by the party was founded which combined military activity with agricultural work.

--In addition, Ismail, a dedicated Marxist, has sought to replace Islam with scientific socialism. Political indoctrination permeates the educational structure. A secondary school of scientific socialism has been established in Aden. Lenin's birthday is celebrated as a national holiday. ☐

The various coups, splits, forced exiles, and the reconstruction of society provide abundant roots for opposition to Ismail's rule. However, the opposition is divided--ideologically fragmented and physically separated into a number of countries. At this point the regime seems secure, although the sources of discontent exist and could be marshalled. The power struggle within the ruling circle appears to provide the most imminent possibility of instability. ☐ 25X1

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